Chapter 12. Environmental Information

12.1 ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED PROJECT

In accordance with Section 15126 of the CEQA Guidelines, the PTEIR must analyze a range of reasonable alternatives to the proposed project that could feasibly attain the objectives of the project. The CEQA Guidelines provide the following direction for analysis of the alternatives.

- Describe a range of reasonable alternatives to the project, or to the location of the project.
- Evaluate the comparative merits of the alternatives.
- If there is a specific proposed project, as in the case of the Meadow Vista Vegetation Management Project, explain why other alternatives were rejected in favor of the proposal
- Focus on alternatives capable of eliminating significant adverse environmental effects or reducing them to a level of insignificance, even if these alternatives would impede to some degree the attainment of the project objectives, or would be more costly.
- If an alternative would cause one or more significant effects in addition to those that would be caused by the project as proposed, the significant effects of the alternative shall be discussed, but in less detail than the significant effects of the project as proposed.

The stated purpose and objective of the Meadow Vista Vegetation Management Project is to reduce wildland fire hazards by implementing shaded fuelbreaks, defensible space, and defensible landscape practices in keeping with objectives of the Meadow Vista Community Plan utilizing the PTEIR/PTHP process.

This section identifies two alternatives to the proposed project including No Project (required by CEQA), and a PTEIR with Reduced Vegetation Management.

No Project Alternative

Under the No Project alternative, the PTEIR/PTHP process would not be used to implement vegetation management projects, including those proposed under the Proposition 204 project. Individual landowners could continue to clear vegetation for defensible space and defensible landscape purposes with little or no assistance or control from local or state agencies. Burning of removed material would be permitted by the air district on designated burn days. Shaded fuel breaks would be implemented by local and state agencies as well as private property owners on a voluntary basis and with funds as they become available. If commercial timber harvesting is proposed as part of the vegetation management process, then the existing THP process as administered by CDF would be pursued on an individual basis.

Impacts

It is likely that vegetation management and fuel load reduction would continue to occur, but at a slower rate than with the PTEIR project. The benefits of the application of Forest Practice Rules and mitigation measures within the PTEIR would be reduced with continued private application of fuel reduction measures.

Land Use and Planning. With the No Project alternative, policies of the Meadow Vista Community Plan advocating a fire safe community would not be as strongly reinforced as with the proposed project. The PTEIR/PTHP program is an implementation tool for general plan policy and provides a formal process supporting Placer County and other agencies in their fire management activities.

Geology and Soils. The Forest Practice Rules and the PTEIR mitigation measures provide a comprehensive approach to reducing soil erosion and sedimentation impacts to an insignificant level. As part of the PTHP, in-field monitoring would also be required by CDF to ensure that mitigation measures are implemented. With the No Project alternative, private fuel management activities would continue to be largely unregulated.

Hydrology and Water Quality. The No Project alternative would lead to largely unregulated fuel management, leading to greater potential for water quality impacts as a result of erosion and sedimentation when compared to the proposed project.

Visual Resources. Private fuel management activities, as well as past public agency brush removal projects, often have not been sensitive visual resource impacts in the Meadow Vista community. The PTEIR/PTHP process requires consideration of visual resources and would result in fewer impacts than the No Project alternative.

Biological Resources. The PTEIR/PTHP process requires a pre-operation field survey to identify specific habitats and species concerns and provides other safeguards to protect biological resources. The No Project alternative has no such mitigation requirements. Where fuel management is undertaken by individual property owners, greater impacts to biological resources could result when compared to the proposed project.

Cultural Resources. The PTEIR/PTHP process requires a pre-operation field survey to identify archaeological resources and provides that all activities must stop if such resources are uncovered during the operation and appropriate mitigation implemented. The No Project alternative has no such mitigation requirements. Where fuel management is undertaken by individual property owners, greater impacts to cultural resources could result when compared to the proposed project.

Noise. Noise impacts from chain saws and heavy equipment will not differ substantially with the No Project alternative, although the PTEIR contains mitigation limiting the hours of operation of such equipment.

Air Quality. The proposed project requires that burning of downed material be used only after all other disposal alternatives have been investigated. In addition, coordination with chipper programs is also encouraged. Under the No Project alternative, and with largely private property owner brush removal, it is likely that burning will continue to be the first disposal option considered, leading to continued air quality impacts from smoke, CO and PM_{10}.

Traffic and Circulation. Impacts to traffic and circulation will not differ significantly with the No Project alternative. Fuel management activities adjacent to roadways will continue to be primarily a public agency responsibility and appropriate traffic control and safety measures will be undertaken.

Fire Protection. Impacts to fire protection agencies will be greater with the No Project alternative compared to the proposed project. This could be especially true if the continued build-up of fuel load contributes to a catastrophic wildfire in the community.

Fuel loads would gradually build up throughout the Meadow Vista Community as vegetation densities increase in the absence of harvesting and/or vegetation management. As a result, risks of damaging wildfires would increase relative to existing conditions which would likely result in higher long term losses of houses to fire, as well as an increased potential for human injury during fires.

Increased Impacts as a Result of the Alternative

Compared to the proposed project, the No Project alternative would increase impacts in several areas.

- increased soil erosion and sedimentation leading to greater potential for water quality impacts
- increased impacts to visual resources
- increased potential for impacts to biological and cultural resources
- increased emissions from burning and associated impacts to air quality
- greater impacts to fire protection agencies resulting from an increased potential for a catastrophic fire

Summary. Because of the fuel management practices and standards specified in the PTEIR, the proposed project would reduce wildfire hazards and well as impacts to environmental resources relative to the No Project alternative.

PTEIR with Reduced Vegetation Management

With the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative, the PTEIR process would permit removal of only 15-40% of ground cover instead of the 40-60% proposed with the existing project. This would be accomplished through restriction on the types of silvicultural practices allowed within any PTHP.

Silvicultural practices from the Forest Practice Rules are defined in the *Introduction and Project Description*, including those to be applied in the various harvesting methods described in the PTEIR. Most of the defined practices are allowed under the PTEIR system. With the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative, only alternative prescriptions would be allowed with provisions similar to the Sanitation/Salvage system. Under Sanitation/Salvage, only those trees that are dead, dying, or that have severe structural problems are removed. The Forest Practice Rules alternative prescription would allow a limited number of green trees to be removed.

Land Use and Planning. With the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative, policies of the Meadow Vista Community Plan advocating a fire safe community would not be as strongly reinforced as with the proposed project. There would be somewhat fewer conflicts in general plan policy direction, however. For example, while the Meadow Vista Community Plan calls for a system of fuelbreaks, plan policy also advocates wildlife habitat preservation and protection of viewsheds. Although the potential for wildland fires would be greater with the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative, it provides the community with an opportunity to balance environmental objectives.

Geology and Soils. The Reduced Vegetation Management alternative would result in less ground disturbance than the proposed project. The Forest Practice Rules, the PTEIR mitigation measures, and in-field monitoring required by the PTHP process, however, ensure that impacts to soils with the proposed project or with the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative would be insignificant.

Hydrology and Water Quality. The Forest Practice Rules, the PTEIR mitigation measures, and in-field monitoring required by the PTHP process ensure that impacts to water quality as a result of erosion and sedimentation with the proposed project or with the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative would be insignificant.

Visual Resources. Less vegetation would be removed with the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative. The PTEIR/PTHP process requires consideration of visual resources and this aspect would be strongly reinforced with the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative. This emphasis would likely result in fewer visual impacts than with the proposed project.

Biological Resources. Because there would be less vegetation manipulation, there would be relatively fewer potential impacts to wildlife habitat with this alternative. A CWHR run was used to gauge this reduced wildlife impact of lower vegetation removals. As was theorized, species which require more dense vegetation habitats had habitat values increase, while those that prefer more open vegetation had values reduced. The PTEIR/PTHP process requires a pre-operation field survey to identify specific resources and provides other safeguards to protect biological resources.

Cultural Resources. The PTEIR/PTHP process requires a pre-operation field survey to identify archaeological resources and provides that all activities must stop if such resources are uncovered during the operation with appropriate mitigation implemented. This provision would apply to either the proposed project or the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative.

Noise. Noise impacts from chain saws and heavy equipment will not differ substantially with the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative and the PTEIR contains mitigation limiting the hours of operation of such equipment.

Air Quality. The proposed project requires that burning of downed material be used only after all other disposal alternatives have been investigated. In addition, coordination with chipper programs is also encouraged. These same provisions would apply to the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative. Although there is a somewhat greater potential for burning with the proposed project, impacts of either alternative are not expected to be significant.

Traffic and Circulation. Impacts to traffic and circulation will not differ significantly with the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative. Fuel management activities adjacent to roadways will continue to be primarily a public agency responsibility and appropriate traffic control and safety measures will be undertaken.

Fire Protection. Impacts to fire protection agencies will be greater with the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative compared to the proposed project. This could be especially true if the continued build-up of fuel load contributes to a catastrophic wildfire in the community. Although fuel loads would be reduced on the forest floor, areas of vegetation with vertical and horizontal continuity will still exist. As a result, risks of damaging wildfires would increase, likely resulting in higher long term fire losses and injury.

Increased Impacts as a Result of the Alternative

Compared to the proposed project, the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative would increase impacts to fire protection services and could lead to the greater potential for a catastrophic fire in the future.

Summary. With the Reduced Vegetation Management alternative, less vegetation would be removed than with other silvicultural practices. This could result in less land disturbance, fewer impacts to wildlife, reduced visual impacts, and slightly reduced potential for air quality impacts.

Reduced vegetation management practices inherent in this alternative would not meet the objective of the project which is to reduce wildland fire hazards. By only removing 15-40% of ground cover, areas of vegetation with vertical and horizontal continuity will still exist; as a result, long term fire danger would still include a significant risk of destructive crown fires. This alternative would then not meet many policy objectives of the Meadow Vista Community Plan to provide a fire safe community.

It is important to note that as greater limitations are placed on the PTEIR process (i.e. restrictions on vegetation removal, more stringent mitigation requirements), fewer property owners will voluntarily choose this alternative and the potential effectiveness of Forest Practice Rules and mitigation measures in the PTEIR will be reduced.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The proposed PTEIR project is the environmentally preferred alternative. No Project would not provide the incentives for vegetation management that the PTEIR project would, nor would environmental protection measures be assured with continued private property owner pursuit of fuel load reduction.

The PTEIR with Reduced Vegetation Management alternative would reduce several potential environmental effects of the project but would not meet the overall objectives of the project to reduce wildfire hazards. This could result in greater potential for a catastrophic wildfire in the Meadow Vista community and resulting significant impacts to water quality, biological, visual, cultural and air quality resources, as well as life and property.

12.2 CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Cumulative impacts refer to two or more effects that, when combined, are considerable or compound other environmental impacts. A discussion of cumulative impacts is required when such impacts are significant (State CEQA Guidelines Section 15130). Evaluation of cumulative impacts should be based on a list of past, present, and reasonably anticipated projects.

Within the past ten years, there have been a number of projects within the Meadow Vista Community Plan area that had the potential to impact various resources. The area used for cumulative assessment is generally from the Bear River east to the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks east of Interstate 80, and from the Weimar Crossroads exit on the Interstate south to the Dry Creek exit on the freeway. Resources that could have been potentially impacted included the watershed, biological (both plants and animals), soil productivity, visual resources, and air quality.

The cumulative projects include:

Subdivisions:

- Naturewood, in Section 29,30 & 31 of T14N R9E, MDM.

- Winchester, in Sections 11,12,13 & 14, T13N R8E. This is a 409 lot subdivision with an eighteen hole golf course. Approved plan calls for Nature, Woodland and Wetland Preserves.

Past Timber Harvest Plans:

1988: 2-88-59-PLA(3); 86 acres of alternative prescription located in Sections 5 & 6, T13N R9E, MDM.
1995: 2-95-184-PLA(3); 420 acres of conversion in Sections 11,12,13,14 of T13N R8E, MDM. This was for the Winchester subdivision.

1996: 2-96-014-PLA(3); 16 acres of Alternative prescription in Section 36, T14N R8E, MDM. This was a modified shelterwood, removal step harvest.
1998: 2-98-095-PLA(3): 19 acres of harvesting, including 13 acres of clearcutting in three units, four acres of shelterwood removal step and two acres of sanitation salvage. No new road construction or watercourse crossings involved.

Other Timber Harvests:

There have been various timber harvest plan exemptions and conversion exemptions filed and harvested for dead/dying trees, for removal of vegetation to build houses and other structures, and for firesafe purposes around existing houses, powerlines, and other buildings. These are scattered around the entire community plan area.

Watershed. Vegetation management harvesting has the potential to impact watershed values through direct impacts to watercourses, including removal of shading vegetation, soil erosion into watercourses, and debris falling into watercourses. When added to the effects of overall urbanization, increased housing construction, and the introduction of increased impervious surfaces, these effects are potentially significant.

The PTEIR/PTHP process, however, will reduce the contribution of participating projects to cumulative watershed impacts by providing mitigation measures and the application of Forest Practice Rules to individual properties.

Such measures include the requirement for mapping all watercourses; restricting harvesting and heavy equipment within watercourse zones; prohibiting operations on high or extreme erosion hazard areas; requiring soil stabilization

measures on roads and skid trails; and leaving an overstory in all areas to reduce rainfall impacts. Cumulative impacts will also be reduced by implementation of the Proposition 204 project with specific programs intended to improve water quality in the American River Watershed. With these measures in place, the contribution of the proposed project to cumulative watershed impacts is less than significant.

Soil Erosion/Productivity. The potential for impacts to soil productivity and erosion increases with urbanization and vegetation management activities. To the extent that such activities are regulated by public agencies (subdivision maps, building permits, projects subject to CEQA, CDF regulated projects, etc.) the potential for significant effects is reduced through the application of standards, mitigation measures, and monitoring. It is primarily unregulated activities or those not adequately monitored which contribute most significantly to cumulative soil erosion impacts.

The PTEIR/PTHP process provides soil erosion control measures and limits the contribution to cumulative impacts to a less than significant level. The potential to impact soil productivity and erosion is reduced by Forest Practice Rules and mitigation measures including erosion hazard rating (EHR) mapping down to five acre areas; prohibiting timber operations on high or extreme EHR areas; requiring soil stabilization measures on all skid trails and roads; and prohibiting heavy equipment operations within a watercourse. Cumulative impacts to soils will also be reduced by the Proposition 204 project as its programs are intended to reduce or eliminate non-point sources of pollution, including sedimentation, to area waterways.

Biological Resources. The California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHR) System model run prepared for this PTEIR demonstrates that urbanization in general has a far greater impact on wildlife resources than does vegetative management for fuel reduction (habitat for 47 species lost with urbanization assumptions). As a contributing factor to cumulative biological impacts, however, the PTEIR/PTHP process will result in the selective removal and thinning of vegetation, including a limited number of snags and downed woody debris near roads and around houses as a fire prevention measure.

The CWHR model run indicates that habitat for 72 identified species will be negatively impacted, but for 60 of those species, the decrease in habitat value is less than 5%. This minor decrease in habitat values for some species will be offset by the anticipated increase in habitat value for 102 identified species and by reducing the wildland fire threat for all wildlife and habitat in the area. Watercourse protection measures discussed under "Watershed," above, will also benefit long-term biological resources of the area. With these measures in place, the contribution of the proposed

project to cumulative biological impacts will be less than significant.

Visual Resources. Visual resources will change with cumulative urbanization and vegetation management activities. In some cases, particularly with clearcutting for development of homes, parking, and associated areas, visual resources will be negatively impacted and the character of the immediate area will be changed from a rural and forested environment to a largely urban setting. Vegetative management under the PTEIR/PTHP process will add to these cumulative effects, but the overall impacts will be reduced by the types of harvesting practices required. Because the type of treatment would retain a mixture of some of mature tree growth and a portion of existing ground cover on the site, the contribution of the proposed project to cumulative visual impacts is less than significant.

Shaded fuel break and defensible space areas around houses reduce the amount of vegetation on any particular site, but remaining vegetation will be healthier, and less prone to fire. Visual mitigation includes clean-up of logging slash in areas around houses and adjacent to public access roads; and requirements that a minimum amount of vegetation be left immediately after harvest.

Air Quality. Cumulative air quality impacts are considered potentially significant with continued burning of slash and downed material as urbanization and vegetative management activities occur in the Meadow Vista area. Burning is permitted under the THP process, the CDF fire plan, and by individual property owners subject to CDF and PCAPCD permit procedures. Burning, even on designated burn days, can violate air quality standards for carbon monoxide and particulate. Smoke, in particular, is a nuisance and can adversely affect those with breathing problems.

Under the PTEIR/PTHP process, burning is tightly restricted which could benefit overall air quality as an increased number of property owners participate in the program. Other disposal alternatives, such as chipping and/or removal, are strongly favored over burning. Therefore, the contribution of the proposed project to cumulative air quality impacts is considered minor.

Analysis within the PTEIR indicates, however, that even if all downed material from vegetation management activities were burned at one time, the air quality impacts would be significantly less than those anticipated from a single catastrophic fire if the project was not implemented. Therefore, the proposed project offers a significant benefit above the No Project alternative.

12.3 GROWTH-INDUCING IMPACTS

Evaluation of growth-inducing impacts is based on CEQA Guidelines Section 15126 (g), requiring a discussion of the ways in which a proposed project could:

- Foster economic or population growth;
- Encourage, either direct or indirectly, the construction of additional housing;
- Remove obstacles to growth; or
- Encourage or facilitate, individually or cumulatively, other activities that could significantly affect the environment.

The Vegetation Management Project has limited growth inducing impacts. Reduction of fuel loading and creation of healthier forests in the Meadow Vista area will not foster additional population growth, but rather make the community more fire safe for existing residents. Policies of the MVCP and regulations of the Placer Hills Fire Protection District will also make new development more fire-safe.

Heavy fuel loading and high wildland fire potential has not historically proven an obstacle to growth. Residents generally desire dense vegetation and the privacy, scenery, and wildlife that it brings. Information programs and regulations such as defensible space requirements have educated the public concerning the need for vegetation management. In this regard, the proposed project may be viewed by some as creating a less desirable residential environment. Application of Forest Practice Rules and mitigation measures from the PTEIR will reduce such impacts to a less than significant level.